TOUR CODE

MR2

ADVENTURESABROAD

INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS

Reunion • Mayotte • Mauritius • Seychelles • Madagascar

26 days

Updated 18/12/2012

Day 1 *Arrival in Reunion*

This morning we fly into the French territory of Reunion.

Reunion is a ruggedly beautiful island of contrasts. Three cirques or amphitheatres dominate the topography and the climate is temperate in the mountains. The east coast is humid, with verdant, tropical vegetation and wild, black volcanic beaches, whereas the west coast is generally dry, hot and sunny. Reunion offers beaches, mountain scenery, hiking trails, and one of the world's most active volcanoes, the highest mountain in the Indian Ocean.

ATTENTION LAND ONLY PASSENGERS: In order to qualify for an Indian Ocean Air Pass on which this tour is based, all participants must have all or part of their international air booked with either Air Seychelles, Air Mauritius, or Air Austral. If you intended to secure your own air on a different carrier, then a surcharge will apply (+/- $600). Contact us for more information.

NOTE: This itinerary is based on flight schedules that can change without notice. Though accurate at the time of writing, this programme may require some adjustment or a re-ordering of islands prior to actual departure.

Overnight in St. Denis, Reunion. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *St. Denis - Cilaos*

After breakfast we have a tour of St Denis. Of interest are the Monument aux Morts, the tall victory monument; the Hotel de Ville (Town Hall), considered by many to be the city's most beautiful building; the Cathedrale de St-Denis; and the Prefecture, which was begun in 1735 and served as the Compagnie des Indes headquarters. The Grand Marche is the main handicraft market, featuring a mishmash of items for sale such as Malagasy wooden handicrafts, spices, baskets and furniture.

After the town tour we drive west along the coastal highway and then inland to the mountain town of Cilaos. This is a superb, scenic drive with views of the island's high mountains and steep gorges -- you will understand why Reunion has been called ‘the Nepal of the Indian Ocean'!

Overnight in Cilaos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Cilaos Area*

The Cirque de Cilaos, is one of the most spectacular landscape experiences that can be offered by the island of Reunion. The bottom of the volcano is 100 square kilometers, 1200 m deep and offers a unique outline not to be found elsewhere on the island.

We have the day to enjoy the Cilaos area on foot. The Cilaos amphitheatre is the largest of the cirques, with a beauty

akin to the Alps in summer. There are wonderful hiking trails up into the mountain forests and among the ravines -- and gentle, shorter walks. For those who care not to walk, just outside town, the Irenee Accot health spa offers a wide range of treatments.

This evening be sure to try some special Cilaos red wine, as it is only made and sold up here and has a unique (and powerful) flavour.

Overnight in Cilaos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Cilaos - St Denis, Reunion - Mamoudzou, Mayotte*

Today we transfer back to St Denis in time to connect with our flight to the French island of Mayotte. We will arrive in the main town of Mamoudzou and then take a leisurely drive through villages to our hotel.

Mayotte has inherited a very diverse culture, a richly-textured fabric of African, Persian, Oriental, Malagasy, European and Arab origins. Over the centuries, an indigenous form of Islam has developed on the island. Passed down from the early Arab arrivals, the religion is today omnipresent in daily life. Between tradition and modernity, the society of Mayotte maintains the customary rules under the guidance of cadis, judges with the role of civil servants. Muslim women play an important role in life on Mayotte. Owners of land and houses, responsible for household management, influential in local politics, women are the stabilisers of the island's economic life.

Based on oral tradition, the heritage of Mayotte is not displayed visibly. The history, tales, beliefs and know-how of Mayotte culture are transmitted by the fundis, teachers who possess and pass on knowledge. Thus, fishing, animal husbandry and crop-growing make use of techniques and know-how transmitted from generation to generation. As for the harvesting of the ylang-ylang, Mayotte has maintained the centuries-old methods and rhythms that are its pride and essential elements of its cultural identity.

Balance of the day at leisure to enjoy our beachside resort.

NOTE: Our flight to Mayotte has a strict 20 kg / 44 lb weight limit for luggage, per person. Excess baggage can be left in storage in Reunion.

Overnight on Mayotte. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Mayotte: Island Tour & Free Time*

After breakfast, we depart the Jardin Maore for a half-day tour. One interesting aspect of Mahorese culture are the bangas -- quaint and colourful little houses built by adolescent men when they move out of their parents' house. This is to make them mature and find their status in society without interference from their parents. When these men find a woman to marry, they move to their spouse's home. Most women also wear a yellow facial masks (m'sidzanou) made of ground sandalwood. It's a beauty mask that they wear all day long! We will travel to the west coast with a stop to the Ylang-Ylang & Vanilla Eco Museum in Jimaweni with the explanation about this flower. We will continue to Sada with an overview of its minaret and its islet before leaving the coast into the rain forest where we will see ylang-ylang plantations.

We will have stops at largest baobab tree in Mayotte at Musical Plage. Baobab trees are endemic to Mayotte, Madagascar and Africa. They are very interesting looking trees -- thick trunks, large fruit shaped gourds and remarkable branches that look like the roots are on the top of the tree, instead of underground. Some are estimated to be 1,000 years old. We also stop at the Chirongui Pass to have a wonderful overview of the bay of Boueni and Choungui peak.

Overnight on Mayotte. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Mamoudzou, Mayotte - St Denis, Reunion*

We have the morning at leisure before our departure from the south of the island to Mamoudzou from where we ferry Petite Terre and the airport. Arrival at the airport about 2:00 PM and check in for our afternoon flight to Reunion.

Overnight on Reunion. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 7 *Reunion - Mauritius*

We fly from Reunion to Mauritius.

Mauritius basks in splendid isolation in the warmest ocean of all, the Indian Ocean, just inside the Tropic of Capricorn, bounded by Africa, India and Australia. Surrounded by a tropical sea, enhanced by golden beaches, covered with swaying fields of sugar cane and fringed with exotic coconut palms and casuarinas -- Mauritius is truly a garden.

We have an afternoon tour of Port Louis, the capital city. We visit the harbour, sheltered in a semi circle of mountains; the Natural History Museum, famous for some very rare birds, now extinct; and La Citadelle, a stone fortress situated at the top of a hill from where one can see a view of Port Louis. We also explore the busiest place in the capital, the Port Louis market where you can shop at the local stalls.

Overnight in Mauritius. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *South Mauritius*

After breakfast we proceed on a full day tour to see some of Mauritius' most spectacular scenery with a visit to the extinct volcano, Trou aux Cerfs, The Black River Gorges, and Le Morne Brabant, an imposing cliff similar to the Rock of Gibraltar.

A twisting road leads from Case Noyal village to the coloured earth at Chamarel. It is one of the oldest sites on the island and is also known as the Seven Coloured Earth, a mound of undulating land stretching in contrasting layers of colour, and the patches of blue, green, red, purple and yellow earth are believed to be the result from the weathering of volcanic rocks. The nearby Chamarel waterfalls emerge from the moors and primeval vegetation.

The Black River Gorges, a 6,574 hectare park proclaimed in 1994, protects much of the remaining native forests of Mauritius and provides opportunities for the visitor to enjoy spectacular natural scenery and some of the unique endemic plants and bird life. A boardwalk provides access to the typical dwarf forest of the region and a fenced conservation management area (from which invasive non - native plants have been removed) protects a sample of the remaining healthland.

Overnight on Mauritius. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Mauritius - Mahe, Seychelles*

The morning is free to enjoy this beautiful island.

You may choose to take part in optional activities or excursions. You transfer from the hotel to the jetty of Pointe Maurice to board a boat for Ile Aux Cerfs. Spend the morning at leisure on the island, which has miles of beautiful beaches, wide choice of water sports, restaurant and snacks bars.

In the afternoon/evening we fly to Mahe, Seychelles.

Seemingly forgotten out in the middle of the Indian Ocean, a thousand miles from Africa, more than 115 islands comprise the Seychelles Archipelago, a group of sun-kissed isles fringed by swaying palms and deep, clear lagoons, where wildlife untouched for centuries abounds. Mahe is, by far, the largest island, and it is home to the capital, Victoria, the international airport, the fishing and commercial ports, and most of the population. Although it is the nation's economic hub, it has retained all of its natural beauty and charm.

Overnight in Mahe. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Mahe: Victoria & Free Afternoon*

Today we visit Victoria, the world's smallest capital city. We see such landmarks as the winged monument depicting the islands' ethnic origins and the famous clock tower that replicates one on Vauxhall Bridge Road in London. We also visit the National Museum dedicated to island history, folklore and music. There's time to explore Victoria with colourful markets and curio stalls. Mahe is the center for craft artisans as well as fine art painters, sculptors and woodworkers.

Enjoy a relaxing afternoon.

You may want to participate in some optional activities. There is an easy, incredibly scenic half-day hike to Copollia, led by an expert naturalist, through mountainous forest where you'll enjoy fabulous panoramic views of the Saint Anne Marine National Park and surrounding islands. You'll be introduced to a profusion of rare Seychellois insects, birds and fruits. This is one of Mahe's nicest nature walks (book in advance through your Tour Leader).

This evening you may wish to celebrate your last night in the Seychelles with an optional evening "STARLIGHT SERENADE," a romantic way to spend late afternoon and evening. Cruise from Victoria past Mahe's north coast towards Beau Vallon Beach serenaded by guitars and Creole songs. Drinks are served as the suns sets then cruise on to Round Island in the Marine National Park. On the island you'll have an evening of delicious Creole barbecue, music and dancing.

Your Tour Leader can help you plan your afternoon.

Overnight in Mahe. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Mahe - Praslin Island & La Digue - Mahe*

Today we have a full-day excursion by boat to nearby Praslin Island (pronounced "Prah-lin"). The island features legendary natural beauty and superb beaches. We visit the World Heritage Site of Vallee de Mai -- a unique forest adorned with granite boulders and home to both the black parrot and the amazing Coco de Mer palm.

We ferry across to La Digue, with its impressive perfect beaches sheltered by sculptured boulders, where bicycles and ox-carts ply the narrow roads. Small enough to explore on foot, coconut and vanilla plantations with tumble-down houses abound, along with lush tropical vegetation. At L'Union Estate you'll see coconuts made into copra, then oil,

vanilla cured in the sun, giant tortoises and a majestic Plantation House. There's plenty of time to follow your own interests, including spending time on L'Anse Source D'Argent, one of the world's prettiest beaches. Today's pace is leisurely (islanders would have it no other way!), with plenty of time to soak it in, enjoy a relaxing bbq lunch (included today) and a swim on some of the world's most stunning beaches.

Return to Mahe in the late afternoon.

Overnight on Mahe. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Mahe, Seychelles - St Denis, Reunion*

Today we fly from the Seychelles to Reunion.

Overnight in Reunion. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Reunion - Antananarivo, Madagascar*

Today we fly to Antananarivo.

Antananarivo means ‘City of the Thousand', supposedly because a thousand warriors protected it. By the end of the 18th century, Andrianampoinimerina had taken Antananarivo from his rebellious kinsman and moved his base there from Ambohimanga. From that time until the French conquest in 1895 Madagascar's history centred around the royal palace or rova, the modest houses. There was no reason for the French to move the capital elsewhere: its pleasant climate made it an agreeable place to live, and plenty of French money and planning went into the city we see today.

Overnight in Antananarivo. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Antananarivo - Antsirabe*

In the morning we will have a panoramic sightseeing tour of Antananarivo. Tana has the quality of a child's picture book, with brightly coloured houses stacked upon the hillsides, mauve jacarandas and purple bougainvillea against a deep blue, and rice paddies that are tended right up to the edge of the city. Tana does not have much in the way of "tourist attractions" per se, but we will pause at the Rova, the shell of the Royal Palace built in 1864 for Queen Ranavalona II by the Scotsman, James Cameron. Everything that was wooden burned in 1996, but the imposing stone fortress of a shell still stands.

We then leave the capital and travel towards Antsirabe, founded in 1872 by Norwegian missionaries attracted by the cool climate (1500m / 4,700 ft) and the healing properties of the thermal springs. Along the crest of the island lie the central highlands, a plateau region of red soil giving the country the nickname, "the Red Island."

Antsirabe means "place of much salt," and is the agricultural and industrial centre of Madagascar. This is the centre of a rich agricultural area lying on the slopes of the island's second highest peak.

Overnight in Antsirabe. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Antsirabe - Ambositra - Ranomafana*

Leaving Antsirabe we continue through typical highland scenery of rice paddies and low hills. We stop in Ambositra, the centre of Madagascar's wood carving industry where even the houses have ornately carved wooden balconies and shutters. There is an abundant choice of good quality carved figures and marquetry in several shops.

From Ambositra the scenery becomes increasingly spectacular. We now pass remnants of the western limit of the rainforest. The road runs up and down steep hills, past neat rice paddies interspersed with eucalyptus and pine groves. Our stunning descent into Ranomafana takes us from dry highland vegetation to lush greenery and flowers. We have beautiful views of the tumbling waters of the Namorana River and the lovely unbroken green of virgin forest.

The village of Ranomafana is situated by a river in the lush greenness of the eastern rainforest. The name Ranomafana means "hot water" and it was the waters, not the lemurs, which drew visitors in the colonial days to this place. Today the draw here is the Ranomafana National Park, a fragment of high altitude rainforest that first came to world attention with the discovery of the golden bamboo lemur in 1986.

NOTE: There are some moderate to strenuous walks on this tour that, though optional, are an integral part of experiencing the highlights of the country. Reasonable level of physical fitness and steadiness on one's feet is important for the participant to fully and comfortably enjoy such tour activities.

Overnight in Ranomafana. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Ranomafana National Park*

Today we enjoy morning and evening walks/hikes in the park. Hidden in these trees are at least 12 species of lemur: diademed (Milne-Edwards) sifaka, red-bellied lemur, red-fronted lemur, ruffed lemur and three species of bamboo lemur. At night you can add mouse lemur, avahi, lepilemur, fat-tailed dwarf lemur, and even aye-aye. Then there are more than 110 species of birds with 36 endemic; reptiles, butterflies and other insects. There is also much variety in the vegetation and scenery, all of which can be observed from well-constructed trails.

During our walks through the park we are most likely to see red-fronted brown lemurs and perhaps the rarer red-bellied lemur. The golden bamboo lemur is less easily seen. The most memorable of the easily found lemurs is a subspecies of the diademed sifaka, Milne-Edward's sifaka. Unlike the more familiar Verreaux's sifaka which is largely white, this is dark brown with cream-coloured sides.

Overnight in Ranomafana. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Ranomafana - Fianarantsoa*

This morning we depart from Ranomafana and journey onwards to Fianarantsoa. On our way we pass forest, open country, rice paddies modest country homes as we begin the approach to Fianarantsoa.

Fianarantsoa means 'Place of good learning'. It was founded in 1830 as the administrative capital of Betsileo and is one of the more attractive Malagasy towns. The Upper Town, with its narrow winding streets and plethora of churches, is one of our stops today. Fianarantsoa also has a wonderful market, which features a great variety of herbal medicines and dried fish brought up by train from Manakara.

Overnight in Fianarantsoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Fianarantsoa - Ambalavao - Ranohira*

This morning we drive through fields of rice, corn, potatoes, coffee and even grapes to arrive in Ambalavao where the famous Malagasy 'Antaimoro' paper is made. Antaimoro paper is traditionally made from the bark of the araho tree from the eastern forests, but sisal paste is now sometimes used. After the bark is pounded and softened in water it is smoothed on to linen trays to dry in the sun. While still tacky, dried flowers are pressed into it and brushed over with a thin solution of the liquid bark to hold the flowers in place. The tradition began with Muslim immigrants who wrote Koranic verses on the paper, the only form of writing known in Madagascar before a written Malagasy language was developed nearly five hundred years later using the Roman alphabet.

Ambalavao is also the place where the highly agricultural highland Betsileo tribe (who the most skilled rice cultivators in Madagascar), meet the nomadic, non-agricultural Bara tribal peoples who count their wealth in cattle, not unlike the Masaai in East Africa.

This afternoon we drive to Ranohira through a truly awesome landscape at the foot of the Isalo Mountains.

Overnight in Ranohira. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Isalo National Park*

Today we spend exploring the Isalo National Park on foot.*

Established in 1962, the Isalo National Park protects 815 sq km of sandstone massif wildly eroded by wind and rain into bizarre ridges (known as "runiformes") featuring wild forms, impressive gorges and canyons, and tiny stalagmite pinnacles. The climate is dry tropical with warm temperatures all year around.

One of our options today is a walk to the Piscine Naturelle where a natural stone cave overlooks a crystal-clear waterfall flowing into a deep green pool surrounded by leafy pandanus trees. This tranquil pool is a virtual oasis in the heat, and offers a welcome relief after the long hike to get there.

* NOTE: Due to the nature of the terrain and the heat in this area, the walks here are more difficult on average than others on our program. By now your Tour Leader should have a good sense of overall group abilities and individual limitations and can provide advice on your suitability for today's excursions.

Overnight in Ranohira. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Ranohira - Toliara*

This morning as we drive from Ranohira to Toliara (Tulear), the rugged mountains give way to grasslands. There are some charming villages along the our way, and closer to Toliara we'll see baobab trees and pass through a cotton-growing region.

The name of the town is thought to derive from an encounter with an early sailor who asked a local inhabitant where he might moor his boat. The Malagasy replied: "toly eroa," or "mooring down there." Toliara is relatively modern (1895), designed by a seemingly uninspired French architect. His tree-planting was more successful aesthetically, and the shady tamarind trees provide welcome respite from the sun.

Overnight in Toliara. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Toliara - Andasibe-Mantadia*

This morning we fly back to the capital from where we travel my road to Andasibe-Mantadia (Perinet).

We have an early start for our road journey to the popular rainforest reserve of Andasibe-Mantadia (formerly known as Perinet). The drive over the highlands and escarpment is pleasant and the scenery is stunning. Since this is in the eastern escarpment, the climate is cooler and the rain falls mostly at night. The mist-enshrouded rainforest creates an awesome spectacle in the early morning.

This evening we will go for a walk through the Analamzaotra Special Reserve. There are at least nine species of lemur here, (including the recent discovery of the aye-aye). Our most likely encounter will be with a troop of grey bamboo lemurs which are diurnal and sometimes feed on the bamboo near the warden's house. On a nocturnal lemur hunt one should also look for mouse lemurs and the greater dwarf lemur, which hibernates during the cold season.

Overnight in Andasibe-Mantadia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Andasibe-Mantadia / Analamazaotra*

Today we visit Analamazaotra Special Reserve (walks/hikes in the reserve). This reserve protects the largest of the lemur family, the indri. It stands about three feet high, with a barely visible tail, and black and white markings. You will be an observer: most people see indris in Analamazaotra Special Reserve, and if they don't see them they hear them. It is their voice that makes this lemur extra special: while other lemurs grunt, the indri "sings." It is an eerie, wailing sound somewhere between the song of a whale and a police-siren, and it carries for up to two miles as they call to each other across the forest.

In Malagasy the indri is called Babakoto. There are various legends connected with the indri, which reveals the esteem in which the local people hold them. A popular legend tells of a man who climbed a forest tree to gather wild honey and was severely stung by the bees. Losing his hold, he fell, but was caught by a huge indri which carried him on its back to safety.

This is also a good place for bird watching. There are flowering trees of a species much favoured by the Madagascar green sunbird, which has an iridescent green head and throat. There are also plenty of the cuckoo-like blue couas, blue pigeons, paradise flycatchers, two species of falcon (Newton falcon and Madagascar falcon), two species of black vasa parrot, and many others.

Overnight in Andasibe-Mantadia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 23 *Andasibe-Mantadia - Antananarivo - Berenty*

Today we travel back to Tana from where we fly to Fort Dauphin (Taolagnaro). On arrival we drive to Berenty through beautiful landscape (mountains, endemic plants, baobab, cactus, sisal). The reserve lies some 80 km to the west of Tolagnaro, amid a vast sisal plantation, and the drive there is part of the experience. For the first half of the journey the skyline is composed of rugged green mountains, and "Travellers' trees" (ravenala) dot the landscape. Near Ranopiso is a grove of the very rare three-cornered palm, Neodypsis decary.

We will first stop to visit some pitcher plants whose nearest relatives are in Asia. The yellow 'flowers' (actually modified leaves) lure insects into their sticky depths where they are digested, probably for their nitrogen content.

Before reaching the spiny forest we will stop at an Antanosy 'tomb' (actually the dead are buried elsewhere) known as the tomb of Ranonda. It was carved by the renowned sculptor Fiasia. The artistry of this unpainted wooden memorial is of a very high standard although the carvings are deteriorating in the frequently wet weather.

Berenty is famous for its population of ring-tailed lemurs and sifakas. Henri de Heaulme, and now his son Jean, have made this one of the best-studied 260 hectares of forest in Madagascar. Although in the arid south, its location along the river Mandrare ensures a well-watered habitat for the large variety of animals that live there. In previous years the forest itself was threatened by the rampant spread of the cactus-like 'rubber vine', Cissus quadrangularis, but this is being vigorously tackled.

The following species of lemur are often seen: brown lemur, ring-tailed lemur and sifaka. The lemurs here are well-used to people. There are approximately 350 ring-tailed lemurs in Berenty, and the population has stayed remarkably stable considering that only about a quarter of the babies survive to adulthood. The young are born in September and at first cling to their mother's belly, later climbing on to her back and riding jockey-style.

Overnight at Berenty Private Reserve. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 24 *Berenty Private Reserve*

We have a full day to experience Berenty.

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Overnight at Berenty Private Reserve. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 25 *Berenty - Fort Dauphin - Antananarivo*

Today we drive back to Fort Dauphin from where we fly to Antananarivo in the mid-afternoon.

Overnight in Antananarivo. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 26 *Departure*

Departure from Antananarivo.

NOTE: Ever-changing air schedules from Antananarivo may necessitate an extra overnight at the end of the tour which has NOT been included in tour pricing. Land only passengers please confirm dates with Adventures Abroad BEFORE booking your flights.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.